



4/8/2014 - First impressions.

The mirror is painted differently to the rest of the picture; was it definitely always there? I am struck that the red on the curtain above the royal couple is virtually the same colour as the Santiago cross Velázquez painted on his chest, 2 years later. The mirror shifts the whole meaning of the painting; it is omnipresent and un-ignorable.

The painting feels more intimate and smaller than I expected, which is strange given how big it unquestionably is. Everyone is more tenderly painted than the reproductions give credit, even Phillip at the back, whom Velázquez could often be quite brutally honest about.

It is fantastic how visitors really look at this painting, lots of pointing, explaining and questions. All the Spanish seem to know the painting expertly and pass on their knowledge to their children. A father asks his daughter who Velázquez is looking at, then he answers for her; "he is looking at us, so is he painting us?" Clearly he has read Foucault's essay! The shark eyes of Velázquez look down slightly, not straight ahead; he is aware of the whole space, beyond the canvas. I only think he is looking at me because I am in the museum, however the original audience was King Philip looking at it in his private room, and so surely Velázquez is looking at him.

The unidentified man on the right looks a bit like Velázquez to me, though without the dandy moustache. He seems very distant from anyone else in the painting.

The light above the chamberlain is amazing; it almost burns the retina. There is a long crack of light that cuts the picture; it appears to continue behind Velázquez and the canvas.

The height of the Prado appears to be a similar height to the room depicted in the painting; he must have been so aware of the size of the painting. I wonder how big the room was that the painting was commissioned for/Philip's private room it ended up in?

The painted canvas on the left is straining to be held on by the nails, there is barely enough to get around the edge of the stretcher, let alone reach the back. It is almost as if Velázquez is saying that this is as BIG as it can get.

Las Meninas has one less guard than Guernica!

Andrew 5/8/14 22:37

Deleted: First impressions. .

Andrew 5/8/14 22:38

Deleted: , no doubt at all, but it

Andrew 19/8/14 16:12

Deleted: . This could be because of the reflection of light glare at the edges, or is it because it could have been painted later on, like the cross, I wonder if anyone knows if the mirror

Andrew 19/8/14 16:07

Deleted: on the top

Andrew 5/8/14 10:09

Deleted: in

Andrew 5/8/14 22:27

Deleted: ; it would be so different in terms of power distribution between King, Queen, family, court members, Velázquez, if the mirror was instead a Rubens.

Andrew 5/8/14 22:27

Deleted: James Elkins wrote this in an email and I did not think I would agree knowing the image and the proportions, he also said it was softer. For me it is more intimate

Andrew 20/8/14 13:37

Deleted: This also fits with Steve's idea of the painting being the first installation.

Andrew 5/8/14 22:31

Deleted: Both in the painting's composition and out from the painting. What does his eyes say? Pity? Disdain? Admiration? Thanks? Humility? Arrogance? I like to think of all the above, but up close they look like shark eyes more than anything. .

Andrew 5/8/14 22:52

Deleted: do my eyes deceive me or does it look like it almost

Andrew 5/8/14 22:52

Deleted: appears to

Andrew 5/8/14 22:52

Deleted: , I am sure I can make out a faint line

Andrew 5/8/14 22:32

Deleted: The bloody light in the gallery does the same thing to the top of the painting, which you can only see by standing quite a way back due to the glare on the glass. I hate it when that happens in galleries, I like to be up close.

Andrew 19/8/14 16:09

Deleted: one

Andrew 20/8/14 13:39

Deleted: and how it fitted in with space

Andrew 5/8/14 22:33

Deleted: The frame is incredible, how can something so ornate, or rather intricate, be simultaneously so modest; and black too, often quite dominating. Thank goodness there is no gilt, like the other 15 Velázquez's in the room; I must give due time to them as well, they are so familiar and magnificent also.

Andrew 5/8/14 10:13

Deleted: he

Andrew 30/8/14 20:29

Deleted: i

Paradoxically For the First Time

By Andrew Bracey

*"Las Meninas! Oh no not again! For pity's sake! Enough already! Everything's been said about it! Everything? Or nothing? What's the difference, enough is definitely enough!"*¹

So begins Daniel Arasse's (and this) essay on Velázquez's masterpiece and it is true. And yet, Arasse, Foucault, Picasso and countless others return to this painting, perhaps more than any other, to try and find something significant. This short commentary is meant to do something very simple; to be a record of looking hard at something that is intrinsically important and familiar to me, paradoxically for the first time. *Las Meninas* is my favourite painting, but I have never seen it in the flesh, only through reproduction.

Las Meninas looks so different every time I see it. A quick Google image search brings up a vast network of different sizes, colour configurations, framing, details, versions (including by other artists) and states of analysis. But I do not mean this. Talking to someone about *Las Meninas* frequently generates something I had not seen in or thought about the painting before. I have been fascinated by the many different approaches to and interpretations of the painting by historians, theorists and artists. All of this has been measured through my knowledge and experience of the reproduced image.

As (*detail*) deals with the reproduced painting, I wanted to flip this construct and write about what you can get from a painting that you cannot get from a reproduction. I believe any painting really needs to be seen in person to be truly understood. Reproductions and written accounts are different, maybe because they are not your own experience. To reflect the multiple responses to *Las Meninas* each page of this essay has a different tone or presentation of the writing. It can be read as a whole, or juggled about in sections.

¹ Arasse, Daniel, 2013, *Take A Closer Look*, Princetown, Princetown University Press, p 131

A list of things I did not see in Las Meninas before I saw it

1. The red on the curtain in the mirror is the same colour as the Santiago cross on Velázquez's chest.
2. Strangely I had never noticed the dwarf's foot on the dog before. Is the foot waking the dog (dogs are always awake in Velázquez's other paintings) or is the dog in the act of wincing from being kicked? Also the dwarf's right leg has been changed, there is a visible, painted outline from another position.
3. It seems smaller than I would have imagined. I thought the people would be life size.
4. Velázquez has painted such tenderness in all the people's faces.
5. Velázquez's eyes have no pupils/whites, they are like shark eyes; one looks at the canvas and one looks at us/the king/out the picture.
6. The nails/canvas are barely stretched on the frame he is painting.
7. How bright the light is in the doorway, the reproductions all dim this.
8. The crack of light from the door going across the halfway point in the canvas.
9. The incredible black ebony frame – I have seen images with this on, but it is extraordinary in the gallery.
10. Of course, seeing it in the context of the Prado's collection (alongside the Titians and Goya's especially), with the other 14 Velázquez's in the room and the people talking and gesturing, changes it so much (Thomas Struth got it right with his photographs of the painting).
11. The jug in Margarita's hand is the same colour as the Santiago cross; was this and the curtain in the mirror painted in later also?
12. The bag in the dwarfs hand; did I read that it was discovered that she once held a ring?

13. The way the door is painted, gives a real sense of depth and solidness.

14. In reproductions, I find Margarita is the first focus when looking; in the painting it oscillates between Velázquez and the mirrored King and Queen.

15. All the men are dressed in black/dark, all the woman have lighter clothes, or have white prominently featured.

16. Just how much it means to the Spanish people and how educated they are about it.

17. The impossibility of the reflection, it does not reflect anything of the room, only the royal couple, who if it was a true reflection would have been far away and certainly not as they appear.

18. It is obvious, but half the painting has little content, so the focus of the painting is a 'landscape' at the bottom, whilst the space above it creates the 'portrait' format.

19. Velázquez is not painting, he is pausing from the act to pose for his painting.

20. The mirror is not in the centre of the painting, I had always thought it was. Instead it is at a point on the open door.

21. The painting is made of 3 stitched together sections of canvas.

22. Velázquez has painted himself younger than he surely looked at the time he painted Las Meninas; he was 57 and looks 30. Ironic considering how honestly he apparently painted King Phillip.

23. The unidentified man looks a bit like Velázquez to me, with no moustache, but about 57.

24. The floral brooch on Margarita is huge, as big as her face.

25. One of the brushes Velázquez holds is very long, disappearing behind his leg.

Las Meninas is the greatest painting. This statement is of course absurd, how can I distinguish it as being better than Vermeer's *The Artist in his Studio* or Fra Angelico's frescos in San Marco? In the Prado there is a version of the *Mona Lisa*, painted by a pupil alongside Leonardo as he painted his masterpiece¹. In the 10 minutes I spent in the gallery I counted seven people looking at the picture, and only two with any intensity. And yet the Louvre is packed with people who flock to only see the *Mona Lisa*.² *Las Meninas* has a similar appeal. I had one minute alone with *Las Meninas* in my three days in Madrid, the rest of the time there was always a crowd of twenty or more.

Standing in front of the painting, I started to wonder if the significance attached to the painting by so many others, has infiltrated me, to form my opinion, as opposed to the painting itself. Is this genuinely my favourite painting? Somehow I think I was more certain about this before I saw it in person.

But the more time I spent with the painting, the more it gave. *Las Meninas* is enigmatic, above everything else. No amount of analysis and research has made a definitive interpretation of the painting; Velázquez even changed the painting; we know that the cross was added later, but other changes were also (apparently) made to shift the focus from the record of Maragrita being the heiress to that of a 'family' portrait. Mystery and speculation abounds. The readings of it are diverse and near infinite. The space Velázquez created in the painting is phenomenal. The structuring of the painting is complex. This all makes it complex and intriguing.

It is a painting that occupies (my) headspace like no other; it is subversive; it is a painting that keeps giving. It makes me want to keep looking and thinking.

¹ "In the Louvre's original, which will not be cleaned in the foreseeable future, Lisa's face is obscured by old, cracked varnish, making her appear almost middle aged. In the Prado copy we see her as she would have looked at the time—as a radiant young woman in her early 20s." Bailey, Martin, 2012, Earliest copy of Mona Lisa found in Prado, *The Art Newspaper*, February 1st, <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Earliest-copy-of-Mona-Lisa-found-in-Prado/25514> accessed 9/8/2014

² <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2004/oct/19/art.france> accessed 9/8/2014





